

THE WORLD BEYOND THE HILL

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SCIENCE FICTION AND
THE QUEST FOR TRANSCENDENCE

Alexei & Cory Panshin

PHOENIX PICK



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This book is dedicated to

JOHN W. CAMPBELL

EDMOND HAMILTON

E.E. "DOC" SMITH

and

JACK WILLIAMSON

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The intermediary between the world of Mystery and the world
of visibility can only be the Imagination . . .

—HENRY CORBIN

after IBN ARABI

Preface

For as long as we humans have existed in our present intermediate state as creatures more than merely animal but also less human than we can be and will be, there have been mythic storytellers. These are men and women who have taken the best knowledge of their time and place and combined it with a sense of the incompleteness of mankind and the fundamental mystery of existence, and then told stories of higher possibility: Stories of fear and wonder. Stories of quest into unknown lands and return with magical gifts which transform the world. Stories of the beginning and the end of all things.

The myths that we learn as we are growing up provide us with guidance in life. In their conservative aspect, myths confirm us in our localness. They teach us how to be a citizen of Rome, a Huichol Indian, or a contemporary American. But far more important is that in their radical aspect, myths alert us to the limitations of how we presently live and who we take ourselves to be, and lead us on toward what we are not yet.

By the manner in which we conduct ourselves and the goals for which we strive, we attempt to make our myths come true in the world. The efforts we make change the world and alter our knowledge. Then new myths become necessary.

The myth of the modern Western world has been science fiction. The ability of this literature to guide our efforts and set our goals can be seen all around us.

The submarine that first traveled to the North Pole—the first nuclear-powered ship—was named the *Nautilus* after the superscientific submarine of Jules Verne's Captain Nemo. And its commander would later say that he had been inspired to become a submariner by reading *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* as a youngster.

The idea that an atomic bomb might actually be made first came to a physicist who had originally encountered the concept of atomic weapons in a story by H. G. Wells.

The prototype orbital shuttle—an almost-spaceship—has been named the *Enterprise* after the galaxy-exploring spaceship imagined in the television series *Star Trek*.

The world that we live in has been formed in the image of the myth of science fiction. Anything we use today may have been made by a robot. Children play interactive games with household computers, and thinking machines play championship-level chess. Men in rockets have traveled to the moon, and we have even sent off greetings to the stars.

The story of the complete life cycle of this myth is presented in this book, beginning with the first faint glimmerings that “science” might be a new name for higher possibility, and ending with modern mythmakers able to imagine that mankind might assume control of its own destiny, establish a galaxy-wide stellar empire, and evolve into a higher order of being.

For those who are interested in the dynamics of myth, this book tells how a new myth comes into being, how the makers of myth conceive and produce their stories, how myth both responds to worldly change and anticipates it, and how one myth at the conclusion of its usefulness may evolve into another.

For those who have love for the myth of science fiction, this book shows where its central ideas and images came from and how they developed, from a time prior to the point when this literature even had a name up until the moment of crisis and opportunity when mythmakers came to the realization that their sense of higher human potential could no longer be contained by the name “science” and began to use another.

And for those with dreams of a sounder, more holistic, more human way of life beyond the fragmentation and purposelessness which presently dominate our society, this book indicates not only how our myths change us, but how we change our myths. It shows how the storytellers of SF, having come to recognize the limitations of a world built upon scientific materialism, altered their myth and laid down the basis for a new age of higher consciousness.

The Mystery of Science Fiction

Science fiction is a literature of the mythic imagination. In science fiction stories, spaceships and time machines carry us outside ourselves, outside our world, outside everything we know, to distant realms that none of us has ever seen—to the future and outer space. In science fiction, we encounter unknown powers, alien beings, and worlds of wonder where things become possible that are presently impossible to us.

These marvels are the very essence of science fiction. They are the source of science fiction's fascination and appeal. Without them, science fiction would be just like everything else—normal, known, ordinary, and commonplace. As it is, science fiction is irrational, extraordinary, elusive, wonderful, never completely to be known.

This quality of the unknown, the marvelous, and the wonderful we may call transcendence. No matter how rational and fact-based science fiction has attempted to be, the marvelous has been a constant element as well. The acknowledgment of transcendence was present from the moment that science fiction existed as a distinct literary form.

It was the conscious hope of Hugo Gernsback, the immigrant technocrat who named the genre, that science fiction should be fiction about science. It was Gernsback's aim to publish a literature that would foresee the possibilities of science-to-come, stories of imaginary technology, stories that would be extravagant fiction today, but cold fact tomorrow.

To this end, in 1924, Gernsback sent out a circular to 25,000 people announcing a new magazine. It was to be called *Scientifiction*. This was a portmanteau word of Gernsback's own devising, meaning "scientific fiction." But the response to Gernsback's circular was so poor that he abandoned his idea for two years.

Then, in March 1926, Gernsback took a gamble. Without any prior announcement, he issued the first number of a new magazine which he

described as “a magazine of scientification.” But this magazine was called *Amazing Stories*.

In an editorial in an early issue, Gernsback attempted to justify what he had done. He wrote:

We really need not make any excuse for *Amazing Stories*, because the title represents exactly what the stories really are. There is a standing rule in our editorial offices that unless the story is *amazing*, it should not be published in the magazine. To be sure, the amazing quality is only *one* requisite, because the story must contain science in *every* case.

Gernsback was able to fulfill his true desire to the extent that it was he who selected the name by which this new literature would present itself to the world-at-large: First “scientification,” and then later the name that would stick—“science fiction.”

But when Gernsback chose a title to attract an audience to the magazine he published, he had to put transcendence—“the amazing quality”—ahead of science.

And so it would be, again and again. The transcendence at the heart of science fiction can be seen revealed in the meanings of a whole constellation of words used as the titles of one science fiction magazine or another. These words have been the promise of the genre for those who have loved it: *amazing*, *astonishing*, *astounding*, *fantastic*, *marvel*, *miracle*, *startling*, *thrilling wonder*, *unknown*, *worlds beyond*.

These evocative words are related to each other. Many of them share common roots. To look up the meaning of one in the dictionary is inevitably to be referred to another:¹

To *astound* is to bewilder with sudden surprise, to amaze.

To *amaze* is to fill with great surprise or sudden wonder, to astonish.

To *astonish* is to fill with sudden wonder or surprise.

To *wonder* is to be seized or filled with amazement, to marvel.

To *marvel* is to become full of wonder, be astonished or surprised.

Around and around these words chase each other, all the while pointing to something unexpected, mysterious and impressive. The deeper we look into these words—and into the older words in other languages from which they sprang—the more we can see that taken together, they indicate a unique extra-dimensional presence.

What characteristics are to be discerned of this elephant in the dark?

It is baffling to the rational mind, as bewildering as a blow on the head. It is sudden or shocking. Its appearance is strange or weird. It is piercing, like being struck by a bolt of lightning. It causes shivers of excitement. It arouses feelings of admiration and awe. It apparently contradicts known scientific

laws. It has a connection with the faculty of the imagination. It “seizes,” it “fills,” it “shows,” it “makes visible.” It is of a higher reality. It is the measure of things.

That is what these potent words have meant during their long history. They are the indications of transcendence: of unknown things, higher possibilities, and human becoming.

We are all familiar with the transcendent symbols of ancient myth. Even though they are no longer *believed in* by modern Western culture, these symbols have been preserved into the present in religious texts and fairytales and echoed in contemporary fantasy stories.

As examples, there are the marvelous old magical powers: wishing rings, enchanted swords, draughts of immortality, caps of invisibility, seven-league boots, ever-filled purses, wells of wisdom, runes, spells, curses and prophecies. There are the ancient mythic beings: gods and ghosts, witches and wizards, brownies and elves, ogres and angels, cyclopes and centaurs, giants and jinns. And in ancient myth, there are places of wonder, countries where anything might happen to us, mysterious realms with names like Eden and Arcadia, the Forest Primeval, Valhalla, the Isles of the Blessed, and East of the Sun and West of the Moon.

Science fiction has been different from this. Like ancient myth, science fiction has presented transcendent powers, beings and realms, but they have had very different names and been conceived of in different ways than the wonders and marvels of previous myth:

The transcendent powers of science fiction have been “scientific” rather than “magical” in nature.

The transcendent beings of science fiction have not been demons and spirits, but rather mechanical robots, mutated humans, and alien creatures from other planets.

The transcendent realms of science fiction have not been located in the heavens or the underworld of ancient religious conception. Instead, these marvelous countries have been placed in the outer space of astronomical study, or in the parallel worlds theoretically posited by our mathematics, or in the future.

From its beginnings, science fiction has been the mythic vehicle of one particular culture, the rational, materialistic, weigh-and-measure, science-and-technology minded culture that has arisen in Europe and America since the Renaissance—so-called modern Western civilization. As a myth, science fiction speaks in their own language to those persons who “think Western,” those people who are the product of the logic of Descartes, the physics of Newton, the encyclopedism of Diderot, the skepticism of Voltaire, the practical experimentation of Franklin, the biology of Darwin, the inventions of Edison, and the revised relativistic physics of Einstein.

This is our culture's best knowledge. And active myth always presents the transcendent in terms which reflect current best knowledge and then reach beyond its bounds.

It is no accident that Hugo Gernsback declared that fiction in *Amazing Stories* had to be scientific—true to best knowledge—as well as transcendent. This is the recipe for myth in every culture and at every time.

We seek that which is beyond the bounds of our best knowledge. And when we find it, we bring it home and add it to our store. This is how human beings learn, and how cultures change and develop.

Fantasy stories are not fully mythic because they cling to ancient images of transcendent possibility which no longer appear plausible. Although these may inspire us with reminders of the mysteriousness of transcendence, they are inconsistent with our best knowledge and so cannot guide us to action.

Mundane fiction is also incompletely mythic because the only things it sees as possible are those which exist or which have existed. As strongly as it may reinforce our sense of plausible possibility, at best it can only present larger-than-life characters and situations that remind us of the existence of transcendence without actually daring to be transcendent.

Science fiction has been effective myth for our time because it respects both the actual and the transcendent. It takes account of what we know and what we don't and then looks beyond the here-and-now to thrill and inspire us with dreams of what might be.

This is the story of the dreams that have been presented by the modern myth of science fiction—and of the consequences when they began to come true.

Notes and References

NOTES:

- 1 *p. 14*: All definitions and derivations of words used as the titles of science fiction magazines are from *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, College Edition* (Cleveland and New York: World, 1960).

REFERENCES:

- Hugo Gernsback is quoted from "Editorially Speaking," *Amazing Stories*, September 1926, p. 483.

BEFORE SCIENCE FICTION

PART

1

The end of our Foundation is the knowledge of Causes, the secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible.

—FRANCIS BACON

A Mythic Fall

In founding *Amazing Stories* in 1926, Hugo Gernsback recognized science fiction as the special mythic vehicle of modern Western scientific culture. He gave the genre a name and a home of its own.

But science fiction was not Hugo Gernsback's private invention. SF had a long and slow proto-development before the days of Gernsback, before it was a named and recognized form.

Gernsback was aware of himself as working in a tradition that *Amazing Stories* was intended to extend. In his very first editorial in *Amazing*, Gernsback attempted to define and justify his "new" literary form by pointing to the work of three writers of the previous hundred years: "By 'scientifiction' I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision."

But the true roots of that SF development which Gernsback consolidated under the name "science fiction" can be traced even earlier than the work of Edgar Allan Poe.

It would be fair to say that as soon as there was a special and distinctive modern Western mode of thought, there was a need and a potential for SF as a special and distinctive form of myth. And all of that which has happened up to Gernsback's time and since has been the gradual unfolding and fulfillment of that potential and that need.

The new myth of SF became necessary when a new worldview was adopted by the West during the Seventeenth Century. This worldview rejected the very basis of traditional conceptions of transcendence.

The transcendent symbols of ancient myth—the magical powers, supernatural beings, and otherworldly realms—were all grounded in a fundamental belief in the existence of *spirit*, as distinct from *matter*. It was the given opinion of all traditional thought that there was a realm of *spirit* as well as a realm of *matter* with connections between the two. But it was

spirit that was the more powerful and enduring, and closer to the true origin of things.

During the Seventeenth Century in the West, there was a great revolution of thought, a rebellion against *spirit* and the worldly order of kings and prelates that justified itself by appeal to the invisible. Men of a new scientific cast of mind appeared, concerned with objective examination of the world around them, men like Francis Bacon and Johannes Kepler, Galileo and Descartes. As the result of their writings and investigations, a new philosophy of rational materialism came to be adopted. In the view of this new Western philosophy, all that could not be proved, measured, or logically argued from material principles was subject to doubt.

The new scientific philosophy did not make its way easily or lightly. In 1600, the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno was burned by the Inquisition for asserting, among other things, the existence of a multiplicity of worlds beyond our Earth. Other adherents of the new mode of thought were silenced, like Galileo, or imprisoned for years, like Tommaso Campanella. Nonetheless, through the Seventeenth Century, the attention of the West moved gradually but inexorably away from the invisible world of spirit and toward the study and manipulation of matter.

The concept of spirit was not immediately and totally discarded, but a sharp separation was made between spirit and matter. Two elements of spirit were still conceded, even by the most radical thinkers—God and the human soul. God was a cosmic clockmaker who, some long whiles past, had set the great machinery of the universe in motion, withdrawing discreetly to let it tick and whirl its way to eternity. As for the human soul—one brave and tattered shred of spirit in a universe otherwise made of dead matter—why, that was the hope and promise of human specialness and purpose, and could not easily be surrendered. But the new prevailing materialistic philosophy of the West would not allow that God or the soul had any direct influence on the everyday cause-and-effect world.

An appropriate date to mark the emergence of scientific rationalism as the leading mode of Western thought and culture is the year 1685. It is possible to argue that the old worldview still prevailed prior to that time. But after that year, we can say that the balance of opinion in Western society was in favor of rational materialism.

We can see our point illustrated in two facts. The year 1685 was when the last execution for witchcraft in England took place. Also in England in 1685, Isaac Newton arrived at the Universal Law of Gravitation. In both cases, the passing of the old belief in the realm of spirit is indicated. After this, spirit-based witchcraft, for centuries the bugaboo of Western man, would no longer be given serious credence by leaders of opinion—the men who make and enforce the law. At the same time, a new rule of rational physics had proclaimed

the high heavens—formerly considered to be a part of the spirit realm—to be subject to the same mechanisms that govern the motion of bodies on Earth.

The shift from one worldview to the other is visible in the imaginative literature of the Seventeenth Century. In the early years of the Seventeenth Century, in *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare might write of witches, ghosts and magic. Even as late as the 1660s and 1670s, in *Paradise Lost* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Milton and John Bunyan could still write with the old seriousness of Hell and Heaven. By the 1690s, this was no longer possible. The transcendent symbols of traditional mythic literature could no longer be considered plausible. As things of the spirit, they had no part in a material world.

By the turn of the century, the old wonders and marvels could only appear as the stuff of simple entertainments, such as the literary fairytales like “Cinderella” and “Beauty and the Beast” that were the delight of the French court during the Age of Reason. One of these, “Princess Rosette” by Madame d'Aulnoy, who died in 1705, may serve as an example of the degree to which even fairytales were affected by the change in worldview. The one fantastic element in this story is the troop of fairies who come to the princess's christening. But these once clearly transcendent beings apparently live in the vicinity of the court rather than in their own spirit realm of Faerie. And instead of giving the child traditional magical gifts—we are told “they had left their book of magic at home”—their role is reduced to giving well-intentioned but incomplete and misleading advice.

The new scientific doubt of the Seventeenth Century was a powerful weapon, a glittering inevitable razor. One slash—and all that was not subject to measurement, to proof or to rational argument was cut away!

A great simplification was undergone in the West. Long-standing political arrangements, the power of religion, the social order itself—all these were eventually to be altered by the change in belief. Much was gained and much was lost in the shift of worldview.

On the one hand, in the West, the great static accumulated weight of the invisible spirit realm was shrugged off. Popular revolutions of a kind previously unthinkable took place in England in 1642 and 1688 and in France in 1789. Kings with a right to rule that had been given to them by God were turned into mere mortal men who might be executed or sent into exile. The Roman Catholic church, which had held the power and dignity of a state for more than a thousand years, was reduced to wielding a merely theoretical authority.

The superstitions of the ages were discarded overnight. There was a great release of pent-up energy. Everything was open to examination; nothing was free from doubt. Armed with his newly invented weapons and machines, his science and skepticism, Western man set off to conquer the whole world.

On the other hand, what was sacrificed was also great: all traditional wisdom, morality, and knowledge based in spirit. Western man, as he launched himself into the world-at-large, was a brainy toolmaker with no morals, out for the main chance, practical, powerful and unscrupulous.

There have always been those in the West who have regretted the choice that was made. For as long as the new ways have been adopted, there have been nostalgists who have longed for the secure order of the old ways, who have wished again for the comfort of mother church and the natural order of feudal society.

But, of course, there is no going back. We are now three hundred years down this particular road. The existential decision to abandon the old given spiritual authority has been made, and it is compelling. Whether we like it or not, we in the West are condemned to examine everything for ourselves and to accept responsibility for the decisions that we make. We were set on this road long ago and we cannot resist it now. We can only follow it out to the end and see where it leads, remembering as we do that what far too often has been taken by Western man as a right to license in the absence of moral rule, first began as the existential moral decision to subject all aspects of life to scientific scrutiny.

Among that which was discarded when Western man set out on his special path was traditional myth with its spirit-based transcendent symbology. The appearance and development of SF can be understood as the gradual re-establishment of myth in the Western world, starting from first principles, and phrasing itself in a new, deliberately "non-spiritual" symbolic vocabulary. From 1685 until the time of Gernsback and his consolidation of the genre, SF developed almost subliminally, slowly working out those basic arguments that would permit transcendent powers, beings and realms to be considered plausible within the special terms and standards of Western rationality and materialism.

But the very first step that was taken by SF—the new myth—was a fall. *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*, which might be named as final works written within the old imaginative order, are high literature. The Age of Reason can boast no imaginative work of comparable stature.

The early Eighteenth Century is a mythic desert. There is very little imaginative literature of any kind from this period, as though without recourse to the traditional symbols, the mythic faculty was stunned into silence. What little imaginative work there was, like *Gulliver's Travels*, can boast only such limited wonders as dwarfs and giants and talking horses employed for purposes of satire. Next to examples of the old myth like *The Odyssey* or *Beowulf*, *The Divine Comedy* or *Doctor Faustus*, a story like *Gulliver's Travels* must seem an imaginative, moral and mythic reduction.

The nearest thing to a new contemporary myth that the period could offer was the utopian story. Though a form of fiction, utopian stories primarily

consisted of static and didactic descriptions of the workings of the Perfected Society. This superior mode of living, conceived as the outward expression of man's God-given rational soul, was the only transcendence this form of imaginative literature had to offer.

In the absence of high mythic literature—epic, romance and tragedy—the new major literary form of the Eighteenth Century was the mimetic novel of social and sexual intrigue, the reflection of the mundane, materialistic middle-class world that was beginning to emerge. One reason that SF developed in comparative obscurity from the beginning of the Age of Reason and Enlightenment to Gernsback's time was that imaginative literature in general was completely overshadowed by the successes of the mimetic novel as exemplified by Fielding and Austen, Dickens and Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Twain. Beside fictions about the real factual world of materiality, the new SF seemed frivolous stuff, merely fanciful.

And SF was also overshadowed by the imaginative literature of former times, which was still held in high regard, even though it was no longer believed in. Next to ancient myth—or even next to comparatively graceless contemporary imitations or retellings of ancient myth—the new SF seemed trivial.

Trivial and frivolous—those were the beginnings from which science fiction grew. SF before Gernsback, and even since, has very often been trivial and frivolous—that is, apparently playful and unserious. Deliberately courting these qualities has been a survival strategy for SF in its times of unpopularity, a way of attracting an audience craving to be entertained, and even a deliberate artistic method. But underneath this protective disguise of playful unseriousness, throughout its history SF has been continuously engaged in the very serious business of reestablishing transcendence in all its guises, and the reinvention of high myth.

The state of the invisible and nonexistent SF of the Eighteenth Century—its uncertainty, its limitation, its special problems and the first tentative steps toward their solution—is best illustrated by one novel published nearly eighty years into the rational era: *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), by Sir Horace Walpole. What is significant about *The Castle of Otranto* insofar as SF is concerned is that it was the first attempt to reshape traditional mythic material into a form acceptable to the modern Western sensibility.

The author of *The Castle of Otranto*, Sir Horace Walpole, was the youngest child of a British prime minister. Walpole was himself a member of Parliament, an extreme political liberal, but is better remembered as a writer of letters and as an eccentric. Walpole was a nostalgist, an antiquarian, one of those who long for the bygone days and ways. In 1753, he began the physical conversion of his country villa, Strawberry Hill, into a little Gothic castle, with details copied out of one book and another. The haunted medieval castle

described in *The Castle of Otranto* is Strawberry Hill combined with Trinity College, Cambridge, and written large.

The Castle of Otranto is Walpole's only novel, although he wrote one play and a number of other books, including a defense of Richard III. Like various SF stories in other eras, *The Castle of Otranto* came to its author in a dream, and then gripped him utterly. In 1765, the year after it was written, Walpole described its genesis in a letter to a friend:

I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. The work grew on my hands, and I grew fond of it—add that I was very glad to think of anything rather than politics. In short I was so engrossed with my tale, which I completed in less than two months, that one evening I wrote from the time I had drunk my tea, about six o'clock, till half an hour after one in the morning, when my hands and fingers were so weary, that I could not hold the pen to finish the sentence, but left Matilda and Isabella talking, in the middle of a paragraph.

To another of his correspondents, Walpole wrote:

I gave reign to my imagination; visions and passions choked me. I wrote it in spite of rules, critics, and philosophers; it seems to me the better for that. I am even persuaded that in the future, when taste will be restored to the place now occupied by philosophy, my poor *Castle* will find admirers.

The Castle of Otranto tells the story of the overthrow of a tyrant prince in an Italian state during the time of the Crusades, and the restoration of the rightful line in the person of a seeming peasant boy of noble bearing. The instrument of this turnabout is the vengeful ghost of the boy's ancestor, Alfonso, poisoned in the Holy Land.

At the outset of the story, the ghost appears as "an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionate quantity of black feathers," and dashes the son of the tyrant prince to bits. At the end, he appears again, after various hauntings, after melodrama and murder, and identifies the rightful heir:

A clap of thunder at that instant shook the castle to its foundations; the earth rocked, and the clank of more than mortal armour was heard behind. . . . The walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense

magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced these words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of saint Nicholas was seen; and receiving Alfonso's shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory.

In today's terms, we might call *The Castle of Otranto* a fantasy in a historical setting. The most obvious model for this novel is the plays of Shakespeare, particularly *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. But Walpole, writing his Gothic fantasy in an era of rules, critics, and philosophers, "which wants only *cold reason*," was not at all certain beforehand what reception his strange dream-begotten story would arouse in a skeptical modern public. He was so uncertain that he took great pains to hide his identity and the true time and place of the book's origin.

He hid himself, and then hid himself again. The title page of the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* declared that it was translated by William Marshal, Gentleman, from the original Italian of Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto.

Walpole did his best to further muddy the waters in a preface written in his persona of Marshal-the-translator. He began by claiming, "The following work was found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529."

Walpole went on to suggest that the story might have been written at the time it was supposed to happen—that is, at some time roughly between 1095 and 1243. But then again, from the names of the servants, perhaps it was written rather nearer in time and place to its original appearance in print. And as for the good Canon Onuphrio Muralto—not mentioned by name in the preface—"Marshal" describes him conjecturally as someone who might have been "an artful priest" who used his abilities as an author to enslave vulgar minds and confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions.

But it was not enough that Walpole attempted to slide his story off on an irresponsible person in some former time and place. As Marshal, he went on in his preface to apologize at length for the marvels in his story:

The solution of the author's motives is however offered as a mere conjecture. Whatever his motives were, or whatever effects the execution of them might have, his work can only be laid before the public at present as a matter of entertainment. Even as such, some apology for it is necessary. Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances. That was not the case when our author wrote; much less when the story itself is supposed to have happened. Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to

the *manners* of the times who should omit all mention of them. He is not bound to believe them himself, but must represent his actors as believing them.

If this *air* of the *miraculous* is excused, the reader will find nothing else unworthy of his perusal. Allow the possibilities of the facts, and all the actors comport themselves as persons would do in their situation.

What? Excuse the miraculous, the very inspiration and fabric of his story, as “unworthy”? Plead verisimilitude and plausibility? Here the mask of the weird priest Muralto slips aside and we see the author of the preface for a moment revealing himself as the author of the story, a modern attempting to conjure up the miraculous again in a bygone setting for a modern audience that could not accept the miraculous as a fact in its own daily life.

So—hiding behind a false title page, hiding behind a misleading and apologetic preface, hiding behind two different false beards—Walpole gave his story of the miraculous to the Eighteenth Century British public . . . and a miracle occurred! Walpole’s dream-begotten fancy was enthusiastically received.

The 500-copy first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, published in December 1764, quickly sold out. When a second edition was published in April 1765, Walpole’s initials were on the title page, a clear indication of his identity to the reading public of the time. In a new preface, Walpole explained his intentions more honestly and directly, this time writing not as an uncertain miracle-monger attempting to slip one over on the public, but as a successful artist, hailed as a breath of fresh air, who is explaining how his special trick is performed:

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if in the latter species Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion.

The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions.

This is what Walpole, under his masks, had been saying and not-saying in his original preface: his aim, as a modern, was to combine the transcendent *mystery* of ancient romance with the *plausible* characters of the contemporary novel. The rest of the preface is devoted to a defense of Shakespeare as a model of this kind of mixture.

And, clearly, *The Castle of Otranto* is, on one level, warmed-over ersatz Shakespeare. On another level, however, taken in the context of its own time as an experiment in the novel—and as a unique synthesis of mystery and plausibility—it is revolutionary. *The Castle of Otranto* is given credit by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹ for sparking the Romantic Revival, the great wave of artistic longing for the bygone spiritual ways that seized the West during the following three-quarters of a century.

But the influence that *The Castle of Otranto* has had can be traced even further. Walpole's novel is in some degree the ancestor of at least six separate literary forms of the present day: the mimetic historical novel, the Gothic romance, the supernatural horror story, the mystery story, heroic fantasy in the Tolkien style, and modern science fiction.

Of these, the connection to science fiction may be the least obvious—but still it is present and present again. *The Castle of Otranto*, inasmuch as it initiated the Romantic Revival, which influenced, nurtured and shaped Nineteenth Century SF, is an indirect ancestor of science fiction. However, more directly, *The Castle of Otranto* was the forefather of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which was both in the Gothic tradition and a crucial reaction against it. And finally, still more directly, *The Castle of Otranto* is the ancestor of the new SF because of its concern for both mystery and plausibility, or, in Walpole's words, "the great resources of fancy" and "the rules of probability."

Walpole managed to blend the two, more or less, but his synthesis was both unique and incomplete. It was unique because no later storyteller of the Eighteenth Century, neither Walpole nor anyone else, was able to successfully blend mystery and plausibility again in this same manner. It was incomplete because it was only the human characters, "the mortal agents," that Walpole aimed to make plausible. The ghost of Alfonso, the central transcendent symbol of *The Castle of Otranto*, remained as implausible, as not-to-be-believed, as unacceptably *spiritual*, as ever—the one note in his story that Walpole must hang his head over and call "unworthy."

It is as though by some accident of timing, of special interest, and of passion, Walpole had delivered himself of a prodigy—a blend of the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. As a prodigy, a unique event, *The Castle of Otranto* could be accepted, but it could not be exactly copied.

Walpole's earliest would-be imitator was Clara Reeve, author of a historical study of the romance as well as one novel, *The Champion of Virtue, a Gothic Story* (1777), which is better known as *The Old English Baron*. As in

her model, Reeve's Gothic story was set in an earlier time, the Fifteenth Century, and involved a ghost-haunted castle. But the marvelous element was clearly a problem for her, and she aimed to keep it "within the utmost verge of probability."

Reeve's ghost is confined to a cupboard, where he is given liberty to do no more than groan occasionally. Eventually someone looks within the cupboard and discovers, not the ghost, but his skeleton, evidence of his murder. Here we have, not the actual marvels and unreined imagination of *The Castle of Otranto*, but only that "air of the *miraculous*" of which Walpole spoke in his first preface.

Reeve's narrowness was the natural result of the confinement of her story to familiar historical settings. Transcendence that appears within the context of the everyday world has to be tightly limited in expression and effect, or appear implausible.

Transcendence by definition consists of things which not only do not exist in our familiar world but are different in kind from anything we see around us—things which are not bound by the limitations that bind us. To claim in a story that transcendence is visibly present in our local world—which we may call the Village—would violate our sense of plausibility. We know things just aren't that way here.

It's possible to bring transcendence into the Village only by limiting its visibility and influence—by keeping it in dark corners, restricting its powers, and having it depart before the world at large notices it is there.

Behind Walpole's ghost of Alfonso stands a vast, heavenly realm that empowers it and receives it when its mission is completed. But Clara Reeve could not accept anything as blatantly spiritual as a heavenly realm in her tale. As a result, her ghost is earthbound and unrooted. He comes from nowhere, he vanishes into nothingness, and he accomplishes very little in between.

In Walpole's next imitator, Mrs. Ann Radcliffe, who wrote a handful of novels in the early 1790s, the seeming mystery would be even more rationalized. Mrs. Radcliffe's gambit was to suggest the supernatural—and then to explain it away as the result of human agency and natural coincidences.

In Mrs. Radcliffe's best-remembered novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which we may take as our example, there is once more the historical setting, this time closer yet to the present—the end of the Sixteenth Century. There is the castle and the haunt. But this time the haunter is no ghost at all, but Montoni, lord of the castle of Udolpho and chief of a local robber band, and the hints of the supernatural are all a plot to intimidate an heiress.

Here is a balance of mystery and plausibility more in keeping with the temperament of the time, and hereafter the model of the Gothic story would be Radcliffe rather than Walpole. Beyond Radcliffe, we can see the Gothic romance, with its old manses, frightened heroines and Byronic heroes; we can

see the rational detective story; and we can see the unsupernatural historical romances of Sir Walter Scott, who in 1824 wrote an appreciation of Mrs. Radcliffe's work for a new edition.

If these lines of literary descent from Walpole through Ann Radcliffe came to abandon transcendence entirely, except for that faintest *air of the miraculous* still present only to be dispelled by rationality, there were other stories written after the manner of Walpole in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries in which undisputed mystery continued to figure, but at the opposite price, the abandonment of plausibility. The most extreme example may be *The Monk* (1796), by Matthew Lewis, which compounds a fantastic stew of dead babies, matricide, incestuous rape, torture by the Spanish Inquisition, ghosts, devils, and the Wandering Jew. Stories of this sort aimed to entertain and titillate, to shock and unnerve, but not to persuade.

Horace Walpole's concern in *The Castle of Otranto* had been truly mythic to the extent that he aimed to combine mystery and plausibility. The crucial imperfection of *The Castle of Otranto* was the fundamental implausibility—in modern Western terms of thought—of the central transcendence.

Certain lines of literary descent from Walpole—the Gothic romance, the rational detective story, the historical novel—could not tolerate the implausible and so abandoned transcendence in favor of a strict adherence to “the facts”—the facts of history, the facts of society, the facts of love and marriage, the facts of life and death. And, to the extent to which they favored *what is* over *what might be*, these lines became mythically sterile.

Other forms that owe something to Walpole, like heroic fantasy and the supernatural horror story, could not give up the old spirit-based transcendence. But they were not effective myth, either. They were conservative. They looked backward. They ignored “the facts.” And so they have been reckoned implausible escapist fantasy without relevance to the ordinary conduct of daily life.

SF is that line of descent through Walpole which has sought to find new grounds of plausibility for transcendence that a modern Western audience could relate to and accept. In this book, we are going to follow the line of development that has aimed to extend both the plausibility and the mysteriousness of transcendence. While other Western literary forms have favored either mystery or plausibility, SF is the line that has striven to be complete myth.

Notes and References

NOTES:

1. p. 31: The Castle of Otranto is credited with sparking the Romantic Revival by the entry on Walpole in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Eleventh Edition (New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911).

REFERENCES:

- Hugo Gernsback is quoted from “A New Sort of Magazine,” *Amazing Stories*, April 1926, p. 3.
- Madame D’Aulnoy’s “Princess Rosette” is quoted from Andrew Lang, ed., *The Red Fairy Book* (New York: Dover, 1966).
- Horace Walpole is quoted from *The Castle of Otranto* (London: Oxford, 1964) and from the W.S. Lewis introduction to that edition.
- Clara Reeve is quoted from Lord Ernle, *The Light Reading of Our Ancestors* (London: Hutchinson, 1927), p. 290.

The New Prometheus

The first writer after Walpole concerned to find a point of balance between mystery and plausibility was Mary Shelley. She was able to solve the problem that Walpole had not solved, nor any other writer of the Eighteenth Century. In her story *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), begun when she was not yet nineteen years old, Mary Shelley presented an argument that rendered transcendent power plausible in contemporary Western terms.

The argument that Mary Shelley discovered was an argument for the potential transcendence of creative science. Walpole could not have thought of it—but more than fifty years had passed since *The Castle of Otranto*. The times had changed. The quality of life had changed. In this altered atmosphere, new arguments were possible.

It takes time for new beliefs to be accepted, and even more time for changes in belief to be translated into changes in life. The roots of modern Western scientific thought can be traced at least as far back as the Thirteenth Century, when the English Franciscan friar-philosopher Roger Bacon taught the tools of mathematics and deductive scientific reasoning, and for this and other reasons, such as denying the truth of unexamined authority, was perceived as dangerous by the superiors of his order and placed in confinement. It took no less than four hundred years after this, as we have seen, until the late Seventeenth Century, for the philosophy of scientific rationalism to wrest the leadership of society from the traditional spiritual philosophy.

Even then, the argument between materialism and spiritualism was not settled. Through the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the representatives of spirit were a great conservative force in society. Spirit had vast inherited material wealth and position. It had prominent spokesmen. It had great capacity for resistance to the pace and direction of scientific progress.

Even as late as 1860, it was possible for a bishop and a biologist to debate in public the propriety of the scientific theory of evolution. It was only in the 1920s—the era of Gernsback and the founding of *Amazing Stories*—that scientific materialism finally broke the last grip of traditional thought on the reins of Western society.

For the first hundred years of the modern period, well into the Eighteenth Century, it was possible for most people in the West to live as though nothing had changed, as though the old traditional beliefs were still the rule of society. The scientific doubt of Descartes and the scientific theory of Newton might convince a reasonable man, but for all that, life was still much the same. There was a great deal of radical thought, but very little radical action. Kings and nobles were still kings and nobles, priests were still priests, merchants still merchants, peasants still peasants. Whatever ideas for new parts and for independent action might be in their heads, the actors in the social drama still fit their traditional roles.

The perfect example is Horace Walpole. Just as *The Castle of Otranto* combined the ancient and the modern with no apparent sense of the fundamental contradiction in terms that defeated all imitators, so was Walpole's personal life also a contradiction in terms. In politics, as a member of Parliament, Walpole was a liberal—a modern man. In private lifestyle, Walpole was a conservative. He was a member of the British ruling class, in the last years of his life inheriting the noble title Earl of Orford. He had traditional tastes. He lived a traditional life of high privilege. Life and thought were two different matters to him.

At the end of the Eighteenth Century, when Walpole was an old man, the social stasis was shattered. The American Revolution of 1776 and, even more, the French Revolution of 1789 were profound social events. The American Revolution was an assertion of political independence of thought. The French Revolution was a radical overturning of traditional society in the very heartland of the Western world. People at last had begun to act in accordance with their private thoughts. During the 1790s, the structure of traditional society began to break down.

At this very same time, the new Western material science finally overcame its inertia and moved beyond the stages of criticism and theory, beginning to demonstrate its practical power to transform the world. In the latter part of the Eighteenth Century, the Industrial Revolution began. The steam engine was perfected. The power loom was invented, and the modern factory system emerged. Canals were dug to facilitate commerce. Balloons were flown, demonstrating scientific mastery of the skies. With the Nineteenth Century, the pace of change began to accelerate. In the fifteen years that followed Horace Walpole's death in 1797, the gaslight, the steamboat and the locomotive were all invented.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in the year that Horace Walpole died. The world that she grew up in was very different from his. It was a world with reason to believe in change, a world that was beginning to associate change with the creative powers of science.

At the turn of the Nineteenth Century, the balance between the old views and the new was still precarious. There was profound ambivalence about the new modern world that was being ushered into being. Great enthusiasm alternated with great fear and reluctance, sometimes within the same person. Often within the same person. The new moderns of the Nineteenth Century dared to do what had not been done before, and were frightened at their own audacity.

Mary Shelley was an archetypal young modern of the early Nineteenth Century—a second-generation modern. Her parents had been among the first during the 1790s to advocate new ways contrary to tradition and attempt to live them. Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, had lived with a married man and borne a child out of wedlock. Mary's father, William Godwin, to whom *Frankenstein* is dedicated, was a minister turned freethinker, the author of *Political Justice*, a radical critique of society, and the pioneer social novel, *Caleb Williams*.

When the young poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was dismissed from Oxford in 1811 for authoring a pamphlet entitled "The Necessity of Atheism," it was only natural that he would seek out the acquaintance of the foremost freethinker of the day, William Godwin. In 1814, he met young Mary Godwin in her father's home, and with the aid and company of Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, eloped with her. Mary was sixteen, Shelley five years older. Shelley was already married and a father, with another child on the way, but no matter. In terms of traditional society, Percy Shelley's and Mary Godwin's conduct might be scandalous, but they were only acting out of principle. The willful new ideas of the times were in their heads and they could not bear not to live as they believed.

In the summer of 1816, when she began *Frankenstein*, Mary and Shelley were living with Claire near Geneva, Switzerland. Much had happened to Mary in two years. She had borne Shelley two children, one of whom had died when only two months old. She and Shelley would not be married until the end of December, three weeks after the discovery of the suicide of Shelley's wife, Harriet, who drowned herself in the Serpentine.

Their party in Geneva was joined by George Gordon Byron, with whom Claire had begun an affair, and by whom she would have a daughter in 1817. In an age when poets were pop stars, Byron was a poet and rebellious spirit even more notorious than Shelley, singing sympathy to the devil. He was rumored to have an incestuous relationship with his half-sister. Crippled and handsome, the bearer of a noble title, a rakehell and a revolutionary, Byron

was the living embodiment of the contradictions of the time. He and Shelley hit it off well together, each influencing the other.

It was a rainy May and they were forced to spend time indoors. For amusement, they turned to reading supernatural horror stories, stories that from Mary Shelley's description sound closely related to *The Castle of Otranto*:

Some volumes of ghost stories, translated from the German into French, fell into our hands. There was the History of the Inconstant Lover who, when he thought to clasp the bride to whom he had pledged his vows, found himself in the arms of the pale ghost of her whom he had deserted. There was the tale of the sinful founder of his race, whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house, just when they reached the age of promise. . . . I have not seen these stories since then; but their incidents are as fresh in my mind as if I had read them yesterday.

It was Lord Byron who proposed to the party that each of them should write a ghost story. Byron and Shelley both set to the job confidently, though neither of them did more than turn out fragments. Byron's physician, Dr. John Polidori, also set out to write a story, and in fact did complete one. It was entitled *The Vampyre* and was published in 1819 with a preface and afterword by Byron.

Mary included herself in the competition. Shelley had been pressuring Mary to follow the example of her parents and write, and she had spent her childhood in composing fanciful stories for her own amusement. She volunteered that she, too, would write a story. At first, however, she could not think of one. As she remembered in 1831:

I busied myself *to think of a story*—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. . . . *Have you thought of a story?* I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.

What was the problem? If the problem was merely *to think of a story* and no more, then Mary Shelley might have whipped together some trifle about ghosts and kisses of death, and then either finished it like Dr. Polidori or set it aside like the others. The problem was to write a story that could be believed in. That was what baffled Byron and Shelley and what stymied Mary. How could these people, with their histories and their beliefs, write of inconstant lovers wrapped in the arms of the ghosts of the women they had deserted?

That might be well enough for Polidori—"poor Polidori" as Mary calls him, shaking her head over his story—but it would not do for a young modern.

Mary only found the key to her story at last as a result of listening to a conversation between Byron and Shelley:

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin, (I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoken of as having been done by him,) who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.

What a typically blasphemous conversation! Here these young mods of the early Nineteenth Century were, titillating each other by separating the power of life from God and speculating about spaghetti coming to life like a pair of giggling eight-year-olds. The Darwin they mentioned was Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of Charles, who in the years around 1790 wrote poems about science and evolution. The scientific experiments they discussed were the experiments of Luigi Galvani, who had made the muscles in the legs of dead frogs move through the application of electricity, the newest discovery of science.

After this conversation, Mary went to bed, but lay awake in a twilight state, her mind racing with visions:

When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine; show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handiwork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that

this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

Once again, at a crucial point in the development of SF, we have vital conception taking place within a nonordinary mental state. Mary's creative imagination had accomplished what all her vain "thought and pondering" could not:

Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. "I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow." On the morrow I announced that I had *thought of a story*. I began that day with the words, *It was on a dreary night of November*, making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream.

Like lightning, the solution to the problem of plausible transcendence had broken in upon Mary. It was the power of science that would bring horror to life. She hardly says more than this in her story, but it is enough.

We all know some version of Mary's story from the many *Frankenstein* movies, which are the offspring of Nineteenth Century stage plays. But all these *Frankensteins* were revised and refined, altered for dramatic effect, updated for the sake of plausibility. They are not Mary's story as she wrote it. Her *Frankenstein* was an early Nineteenth Century story, written in the context of the times.

Inasmuch as it is removed into the past and evokes horror, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is in the Gothic tradition. But it is far less Gothic than its popular adaptations. In the original story there is no castle, no baron, no hunchbacked assistant, no dungeons, no chains, and no peasants with torches and pitchforks.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is set in modern times, during the Eighteenth Century, in Walpole's lifetime when science was making its first great impact on the world. Her central character is no nobleman with a private electrical generator and basement laboratory. Her Victor Frankenstein is merely a student of chemistry in nearby Geneva with great aptitude and strange ambitions.

Through diligent study, Victor has learned the secrets of life. As in Byron's and Shelley's conversation, his impulse is to gather the component parts of a creature and endue them with vital warmth. He collects bones from the charnel house and animates them.

We hardly see how the trick is performed. There is none of the “powerful engine” that Mary, in 1831, reported herself as having seen in her dream. The crucial scene that Mary wrote on the morning after her inspiration, the scene of the animation of the monster that begins Chapter 5, is very spare:

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

This is all we get of the mechanics. As in her dream, Mary’s protagonist is immediately horrified at what he has done and runs away. He will tell us no more:

I see by your eagerness, and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be; listen patiently until the end of my story, and you will easily perceive why I am reserved upon that subject.

Here in *Frankenstein* is evidence that exact detail, however useful to plausibility, is not itself necessary for plausibility to be achieved. The plausibility—the potential possibility—of the transcendent science that animates Victor Frankenstein’s creature is established through a dramatic argument. We are prepared for the monster’s animation by this argument, which is presented in the form of the story of Victor Frankenstein’s education.

Mary Shelley’s argument for new plausible transcendence is designed to encapsulate the experience of the early Nineteenth Century, still tied to the past, but a witness to change: At the age of thirteen, Victor Frankenstein stumbles across the alchemical works of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus, the representatives of the old spiritual science, and is struck by their mystery and power. Stimulated by these marvels, he seeks to find the elixir of life and attempts to raise ghosts and devils. But he fails. Victor is a modern, and this ancient spirit-based science will not work for him.

Then Victor becomes acquainted with more contemporary science. Its overwhelming power of doubt ends his attempts to operate the old transcendent science. But it also makes him bitter:

I had a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy. It was very different when the masters of the science sought immortality and

power; such views, although futile, were grand: but now the scene was changed. The ambition of the inquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth.

However, when Victor goes off to the university, his outlook on science is changed. A lecturer in chemistry speaks to his class about ancient science and modern science—and lays the groundwork of plausibility for the marvel of transcendent science that will ensue:

“The ancient teachers of this science,” said he, “promised impossibilities, and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little; they know that metals cannot be transmuted, and that the elixir of life is a chimera. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens: they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.”

If science can do so much, how much more is there that it may yet do?

What a powerful and subtle argument this is, as Mary presents it. It notes the demonstrable historical continuity between alchemy and modern chemistry, and calls them both “science.” It steals the fire from the old transcendence at the same time that it dismisses it and alleges the superior power of modern science. This powerful new science is not science as it may be now, but science-as-an-ideal, science as a potential higher state. This is mythic science, transcendent science, science-beyond-science. It is plausible inasmuch as it is an extension of existing science, and it is mysterious in that it is science that does not yet exist. All that we must do is acknowledge that there are miraculous powers, like the power of life, which modern science may yet discover—and the creature is ready to stir. Transcendence is ready to be born again.

It is not Victor Frankenstein, with his vague “instruments of life,” who is the true “modern Prometheus,” bringer of fire down from heaven, darer of divine wrath. Behind Victor stands his creator. It was she who truly dared the wrath of heaven, who in fear and trembling reanimated the corpse of transcendence. She gave it a shot of super-science, these bones she had reassembled, and watched in horrified fascination as they began to move. Such is the power of super-science.

Mary and Percy Shelley had some sense of the potential inherent in their argument. *Frankenstein* was published anonymously in 1818. In a preface—

written, as Mary later recalled, by Percy—a claim is made. The claim is made in as roundabout and self-denying a fashion as the claim of Walpole in the “William Marshal” preface of *The Castle of Otranto*, but nonetheless, a claim is made:

The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence. I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination; yet in assuming it as the basis of a work of fancy, I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantments. It was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it develops; and however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield.

What is said here so languidly and elliptically is that *Frankenstein* is based on a scientific speculation which the author considers an impossibility. Nonetheless, this scientific transcendence is superior to spectres, enchantments and supernatural terrors. It is exempt from their disadvantages, the author of the preface says, without spelling out the disadvantages. He suggests merely that science-beyond-science permits novel situations and points of view.

In fact, there are great limitations to what Mary Shelley was able to accomplish. She had established an argument for the transcendent power of science-beyond-science, but no more. Not transcendent aliens or realms.

As long as it remains in the background, Frankenstein’s creature does appear as a being of more than human powers. It is endowed with strength and endurance greater than that of an ordinary human, climbing nearly perpendicular ascents during savage lightning storms. It follows poor Victor all over Europe, ruthlessly murdering his bride and his brother while remaining unseen by anyone but Victor.

But the arguments Mary had made for bringing the creature to life in a miraculous manner provided no justification for representing it as the master of higher powers of its own. As a result, when he is finally observed at close range, the creature does not retain his mystery. The instant he opens his mouth to speak and give an account of himself, he reveals himself to be just one more Romantic, pained and wounded by the world. He wonders why men are not more rational, and strikes out wildly in fits of passion and revenge. Another young modern.

No, of the three forms of transcendence, it was transcendent power alone that Mary Shelley was able to reawaken. The simplest transcendence—the

power of creation and destruction. As presented in *Frankenstein*, this was superior power without a proper home, or source, or realm of being. It was superior power without superior beings to operate it. It was live, raw, untamed power, standing alone.

A further limitation of *Frankenstein* was that its transcendence was made after the model of the spirit-based transcendence of former times. Mary Shelley was attempting to write a story—in more contemporary terms—that would be the functional equivalent of *The Castle of Otranto*. The embodiment of her new transcendent science-beyond-science was set to do the work of an old-fashioned ghost—to haunt poor Victor, *clank, clank, rattle, rattle*—as though science-beyond-science didn't have any better work to do than that.

Mary Shelley should suffer no blame for this. She had, after all, set forth with the intention of writing a ghost story in the first place. She was making up her argument for the first time, and because it was the model of transcendence available to her—and the appropriate model to offer to the state of understanding of her audience—her new transcendent science-beyond-science necessarily looked very much like old-fashioned spirit-based necromancy in its effect. Even so, this cutting of science-beyond-science to the shape and size of spiritual conjuring was a limitation.

A third limitation in *Frankenstein* was the attitude of horror taken toward the new transcendence. Within the story, it is precisely because of this attitude that everything goes wrong for Victor Frankenstein. If he had only been able to master his ambivalent passions and sit down and have a chat with his creature, he would have found that they had much in common and a great deal of useful information to exchange. Instead, the instant the creature is born, Victor gets a rising gorge and runs and hides under the bedcovers, and it is this act of rejection that turns his creature against him.

Again, this is not so much a fault as it is a sign of the state of mind of the early Nineteenth Century: They were launched into the new worldview. Science and the general mood of inquiry were having effects on life. People didn't know how they felt about it.

Mary was looking to speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and to curdle the blood. She needed something she genuinely felt ambivalent about. She found that in the speculative conversation between Byron and Shelley. It was well enough to be a freethinker, a challenger of convention, but here was the promise of material science to usurp the power of the Creator and awaken life, even in a corpse. She didn't know how she felt about that. It seemed like a step too far. To write her story was to deal with her anxiety.

But this kind of anxious horror, however necessary a stage, was an impediment. As long as this stage persisted, it effectively prevented any development of the possibilities of science-beyond-science.

Frankenstein was the model of SF for the following forty years, until the 1860s and the stories of Jules Verne. It was not quite as singular and inimitable a model work as *The Castle of Otranto*—but neither was there any clear advance or development of the insights of *Frankenstein*. With its awakening of life in a creature that almost might be a devil, *Frankenstein* was the very limit of dareable speculation. The work that followed it was written well within its shadow.

We should understand that SF at this point had no name and was not a genre. It was not even so much as a story type. It consisted of no more than an argument—the argument for transcendent science-beyond-science. And that argument itself was not taken seriously, so that even Percy Shelley in the original preface to *Frankenstein* could state on Mary's behalf, "I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination. . . ."

Before Mary Shelley, during the Age of Reason of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, there had been no possibility at all of SF literature. This was a time of reaction against the old spirit realm and all its creatures. In a period of "rules, critics, and philosophers" all athirst for rationality, mysterious unknown things were generally not given leave to exist.

Science itself was not then considered to be mysterious. Rather, it was taken to be the rational process of consideration of phenomena that were known but not yet understood. Science was undertaken by gentlemen amateurs. It had a distinctly practical and material nature. It was only at the end of the Age of Reason, with the isolation of the unknown gas oxygen in 1774, the discovery of the unknown planet Uranus in 1781, the launching of the first balloon in 1783, and similar scientific news, that it became just barely possible to perceive science as mysterious.

But who was mentally prepared to make this perception?

During the succeeding Western phase—the Romantic Period of the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries—the spirit of SF was able to descend only now and then, when conditions were just right, to light a fire in the brain of some dreaming or drugged-out writer. The stories that resulted were rare and occasional and uncertain. From time to time, one writer or another would pick up the argument for transcendent science-beyond-science for one story or two—at the utmost half-a-dozen in a lifetime's work—and produce a tale about some weird scientist toying with the forbidden and paying the necessary penalty.

It is this period that is the source of the cliché of the mad scientist studying knowledge that man was not meant to know. In these stories, transcendent science-beyond-science always looks very much like old-fashioned spirit-based transcendence and is used to evoke horror.

Notice how isolated all this is. We have an occasional argument for the power of super-science, mainly employed after 1835, and used for its horror

and novelty and not for any more serious purpose. It is the rare writer who writes this stuff, and he writes it only now and again. And in these stories that followed the line of *Frankenstein*, the scientists, like Victor Frankenstein, are lonely figures—like alchemists or wizards in their private towers—operating “science” known only to themselves.

At the conclusion of *Frankenstein*, the creature, having killed Victor and delivered his last lament, departs for the North Pole—“the most northern extremity of the globe”—there to immolate himself on a solitary funeral pyre. In the stories that followed *Frankenstein*, there was a continuing presumption that transcendent science was somehow unnatural and that after it had turned on its discoverer it would dispose of itself conveniently or gutter out.

No one who wrote of transcendent science had the knowledge or the nerve to push the imagined accomplishments of science beyond the present actual state of science in a mood of calm inquiry, just to see what might be discovered. These Romantic lovers and fearers of transcendence always struck a spark of creative power, and then ran and hid under the bedclothes.

There was no foundation yet for more than this. The new times of the Nineteenth Century were just beginning to reveal a few isolated instances of the power of actual science. It would only be after years of living with the gaslight, the steamboat and the locomotive and their effects that it would become plausible to think of science linking up with science, science altering science, change compounding change.

The mentation of the early Nineteenth Century was not yet prepared to accept more. It needed to assimilate the horror and hubris of daring to usurp the powers of Nature, of daring change at all.

Frankenstein was the most extreme speculation of the period, the only one that must actually be hidden from. The SF stories that followed it only pretended to the horrible and terrifying. In effect, they lit wastebasket fires just to see the flame, and then instead of running and hiding, they threw water on them. In this way, the curiosity of the Romantics mastered their hysteria.

An indication of the narrowness of the SF which followed *Frankenstein* may be seen in its degree of restriction to familiar settings. Romantic SF was confined to the Village. But the proper home of transcendence lies beyond the boundaries of the Village, in what we may call the World Beyond the Hill.

In the Village, our knowledge of what is limits our acceptance of the marvelous. But in distant places, where even ordinary things are different than they are around here, it is easy to believe that more radical difference will be found as well. In the World Beyond the Hill, transcendent power can display itself everywhere, there are superior beings to be encountered, and we may undergo experiences that Village knowledge cannot encompass.

The World Beyond the Hill has been the natural territory of both ancient myth and modern science fiction. But the writers of Romantic SF were not prepared to venture so far. The very thought was unsettling.

They might half-glimpse the possibility of transcendent aliens. They might toy with the thought of passing beyond the bounds of the Village and entering the World Beyond the Hill. They might hint at these possibilities. They might even intimate them in stories that were cast as jokes or pipe dreams. But they could not and did not present dramatic encounters with fully transcendent aliens or realms. Stories that set out to do these things ended abruptly, half-finished, or blew themselves out in storms of conventional hysteria.

One writer of mid-century who made gestures in the direction of transcendent aliens was Fitz-James O'Brien, a literary Bohemian who came to New York City from Ireland in the 1850s. O'Brien was a writer of plays and stories who acted out the by-then well-worn Romantic charades of rebellion and excess and died in the American Civil War, age 34.

O'Brien was neither a writer of Mary Shelley's startling originality nor a literary master of the stature of those other sometime creators of Romantic SF, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. However, in two short stories written at the end of the Fifties, O'Brien presented a beauty and a monster discovered in the crannies of the Village, exotic beings who might, just might, be transcendent. In these two stories, O'Brien came as close as it was possible to come to writing of transcendent aliens in the mid-Nineteenth Century.

In "The Diamond Lens" (1858), the narrator, employing a superscientific microscope, the heart of which is a lens he has obtained through murder, peers into a drop of water and there spies a girl whom he names Animula. This typical madman of science tells us: "It was a female human shape. When I say 'human,' I mean it possessed the outlines of humanity—but there the analogy ends. Its adorable beauty lifted it illimitable heights beyond the loveliest daughter of Adam."

Wow! A girl who might be more than human within a drop of water! But is this a truly superior creature, a transcendent being, or are we merely listening to the normal hyperbole of the lovestruck?

There is no way to be sure. The drop of water evaporates and Animula dies. The presumptuous wretch of a narrator faints in a conventional fit of hysteria and comes up muttering, "They say now that I am mad; but they are mistaken."

Sixty years later, in a story such as Ray Cummings' "The Girl in the Golden Atom" (1919), it would be possible to dream of more than merely seeing an Animula, isolated and alone, inside an atom. In Cummings' story—taken as highly original in its own day—it would be possible to imagine penetrating an atom and finding a world, a girl, and adventure there. Not yet, however.

In O'Brien's "What Was It? A Mystery" (1859), we are presented with a second creature who might be a transcendent alien. This being, mysterious

and invisible, drops down onto the narrator from the vicinity of the ceiling one night when our man has been lying awake after hitting the opium pipe too hard. After a furious struggle, the creature is subdued. But even after capture it remains resolutely silent and invisible until at last it starves to death.

Is this a transcendent alien? Or is it perhaps only a lonely superscientist who has discovered the secret of invisibility, and who will not speak lest his Romantic excuses for himself give the game away? We don't know. It is all a mystery, and remains one.

Of all the writers of Romantic SF, it was Edgar Allan Poe who made the bravest and best attempts to break loose from the confines of the Village. Poe, born in 1809, was a classic Romantic misfit, a threadbare Byron hooked on opium and death. He was the offspring of frail turn-of-the-century Romantic spirits. His father had thrown away a law career to go on the stage. He married Poe's mother, a young actress, and then abandoned her. Before he was three, Poe was an orphan, both of his parents dead. He was taken in and raised as a Virginia gentleman, a style of life he had no way of maintaining as an adult.

Poe worked as an editor and as a writer of poems, tales, reviews and random essays. But because of his temperament and style, he was unable to sustain relationships or hold jobs. He alternated alcohol with his opium, though he lacked all tolerance for liquor. Before his collapse in a Baltimore saloon and death at 40, Poe had taken to muttering to himself in the streets and breaking down in public.

Poe's stories are all attempts to dislocate perception, using a wide variety of methods. They are japes and satires, and tales of the bizarre, mysterious and horrible. If there is a strange fact or a grotesque imagining, Poe will employ it in his attempts to convince us that the familiar world is not as it seems.

Of the writers who came after Mary Shelley, it was Poe who wrote most often and most brilliantly of transcendent science-beyond-science. On at least two occasions, Poe made gestures in the direction of the World Beyond the Hill, but then could not follow through. He was not able to pass beyond the limits of the age to actually show us a world of transcendence.

In "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" (1835), a strange dwarf appears in the skies over Holland in a balloon. He drops a manuscript containing a narrative by one Hans Pfaall, a disappeared bellows-maker, telling of his trip to the Moon in a balloon of his own manufacture. The story proper is Pfaall's narrative.

Poe is very exact in his details of the mechanics of the journey, in as sustained a passage of elaborated science-beyond-science as the Romantic Period has to offer. The trip itself becomes possible by the assumption of a continuous atmosphere from the Earth to the Moon and the discovery of a mysterious gas whose "density is about 37.4 times *less than that of hydrogen.*"

In a note appended to the story, Poe reviews previous utopian stories of ventures to the Moon and claims that his is superior on account of its greater plausibility—using that very word, even italicizing it. He concludes this note by saying: “In ‘Hans Pfaall’ the design is original, inasmuch as regards an attempt at *verisimilitude*, in the application of scientific principles (so far as the whimsical nature of the subject would permit), to the actual passage between the earth and the moon.”

As much as any other thing, it is Poe’s tone of exactness and certainty of detail that would affect later SF and give Hugo Gernsback reason to list Poe among the progenitors of scientification. In the next generation after Poe, a young Jules Verne would read “Hans Pfaall” and be deeply impressed by it. In Verne’s own *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), a character describes Poe as “‘a strange, moody genius’” and recalls the gas thirty-seven times lighter than hydrogen, and all the members of the Baltimore Gun Club whom Verne has gathered together stand and cry, “‘Hurray for Edgar Poe.’”

In the narrative of Hans Pfaall, the balloon venturer arrives at a moon-city, and there follows a two-page catalog of hinted lunar wonders. There is, for instance, “the incomprehensible connection between each particular individual in the moon with some particular individual on earth.” Even more promisingly, there are “those dark and hideous mysteries which lie in the outer regions of the moon—regions which, owing to the almost miraculous accordance of the satellite’s rotation on its own axis with its sidereal rotation about the earth, have never yet been turned, and by God’s mercy, never shall be turned, to the scrutiny of the telescopes of man.”

Dark and hideous mysteries? Well, that is the times and that is Poe—the atheist who invokes God’s mercy, the believer in mystery and the fearer of mystery.

Here we are, plausibly transported from our familiar Village Earth into the World Beyond the Hill, arrived in a place where things promise to be endlessly mysterious. But what kind of a world of wonder—or death—is this? Is it a transcendent realm?

It could be. It should be. But it isn’t.

“Hans Pfaall” does not maintain itself as a story. All the plausible reasoning and hinted mystery have not been for the purpose of establishing a realm of transcendence. Instead, we have been set up to have the rug pulled out from under our feet:

The mystery, we are told, is not real. The narrative has all been a hoax. Hans Pfaall has been playing a trick on the burgomasters and astronomers of Rotterdam.

Dutchmen were the Nineteenth Century’s comic dumbheads. Only characters with names like von Underduk and Rubadub could have been taken in for a moment by a dwarf in a balloon “manufactured entirely of dirty newspapers”

who is passing as an inhabitant of the Moon. Only they could have been stupid enough to have taken seriously a narrative of a fantastic journey that begins on the first of April. Only they would swallow an invented gas that is described as “tasteless but not odorless” but also as “instantaneously fatal to animal life.” It is all a hoax on gullible Dutchmen—and a joke by Poe on us.

How strange and typical of Poe that immediately after a conclusion that turns all that has gone before into a jape at our expense, he should proclaim the superior plausibility of his method. If the Moon is not the world of wonder and mystery that Poe first suggests, but only a joke, then the superior plausibility of his method can have no point.

Was his plausibility serious, or was it a joke? Poe will have it both ways, and must have it both ways. As far as his immediate audience is concerned, it's a joke. Neither he nor they dare to brave the World Beyond the Hill long enough to encounter its transcendence. But, inasmuch as Poe is talking to later writers of SF like Jules Verne, he is completely serious. His appendix is an arrow pointing to the most innovative aspect of “Hans Pfaall”—plausible argument that can carry us to a transcendent realm—even though he himself isn't up to facing that mystery. But then, it has not been unusual in the development of SF for serious methods and arguments to be embodied in very unserious vehicles.

In his longest work, the novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837), Poe made another essay at a trip to a transcendent realm, and again broke off short, unable to nerve himself to enter and stay. Some three-quarters of the novel is taken up with mundane bizarreness: mutiny, shipwreck and cannibalism. Only eventually do we travel sufficient distance to find those signs of radical difference that are the heralds of the World Beyond the Hill. The expedition that has rescued Pym sails unexpectedly into ice-free waters near the South Pole and finds islands there with unknown animals, purple water of strange consistency, and a race of savages with a terror of the color white. Poe even has Pym write: “Many unusual phenomena now indicated that we were entering upon a region of novelty and wonder.”

In the last chapter, Pym, a companion, and a dying native are in a canoe that is being carried dreamily over the waters toward an impossible cataract from the heavens. The story concludes:

And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

With this glimpse of transcendent promise—or, again, of death—the story ends. A note apologizes for the loss of the remaining few chapters at the

time of Pym's "sudden and distressing death," the facts of which, we are told, the public is well acquainted with through the medium of the daily press.

But, of course, we don't know the facts and there were no further chapters, not ever, even though Poe lived another twelve years. Pym was simply another story that Poe couldn't press through to a conclusion. So—he twists our noses, and quits.

From his interests, we may guess that Poe may have had in mind an entry into the hollow interior of the Earth through a hole at the Pole. This was a theory of the time that intrigued him. But Poe's imagination, the wildest of his era, simply balked when it came to passing that spectral guardian and entering the true region of novelty and wonder waiting at the bottom of the chasm. To speak of additional chapters and then not supply them was Poe's way of admitting that more was required in his story than he could bring himself to write.

The transcendent aliens and realms that were impossible for Fitz-James O'Brien and Edgar Allan Poe to imaginatively sustain in the first part of the Nineteenth Century would become readily possible by century's end when Charles Darwin's arguments for evolution, published in 1859, had been absorbed and assimilated. In the meantime, however, SF had another necessary stage of development to pass through, a stage in which SF grew accustomed to the rarefied air of the World Beyond the Hill. In these stories, hysteria was quelled, the nature and uses of super-science were investigated, and transcendent realms were entered at last.

Notes and References

REFERENCES:

- Mary Shelley is quoted from *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (New York: Collier, 1961) and from the Introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* as given in the Collier edition.
- Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens" is quoted from H. Bruce Franklin, ed., *Future Perfect: American Science Fiction of the Nineteenth Century*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Oxford, 1978).
- Edgar Allan Poe's "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" and "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket" are quoted from *The Complete Edgar Allan Poe Tales* (New York: Avenel Books, 1981).